

Is the life you are living too small for your soul's desire?

Excerpt from final chapter of "Finding meaning in the second half of life" (2005) by psychoanalyst James Hollis Ph.D.

Consider these questions. Answer them honestly to yourself or they will prove of no value. If they hurt a bit, or intimidate a lot, then they are hitting home for you. Answer them honestly, and you are on the way to the insight that leads to wisdom, the wisdom that leads to change, the change that leads to a larger life, and the larger life that ultimately provides healing because it is the life the 'gods' intended for you.

1. Where has life, in its unfairness, stuck you, fixated you, caused you to circle back and back upon this wounding as a provisional definition and limitation of your possibilities? Why do you continue to cooperate with the wound, rather than serve something larger, which serves you in return?
2. Where has life blessed you, given you a gift? And what have you done with that gift? How have you accepted the responsibility that goes with it?
3. Where are you blocked by fear, stuck, rigid, resistant to change?
4. What is the fear beneath the fear? The fear that intimidates you only gains its power from the wiring beneath it, the wiring of history, which leads to a deeper fear, a fear from your past. This circuitry activates the old message that this fear, this issue, is larger than you, and so you ignore the unconscious, empowered adult you have become since then.
5. Where was your father stuck, and where has that stuck place shown up in your life? Where was your mother stuck, and where has that stuck place shown up in your life? Are you repeating their lives, their patterns, or trying to overcome them by compensation, or treating the problem in a way that brings harm and further self-alienation? Is this the legacy you will pass on to your children?
6. Where do you avoid conflict, the necessary conflict of values, and therefore avoid living in fidelity with who you are?
7. What ideas, habits, behavioural patterns are holding you back for the large journey of your soul (or *psyche*)? What secondary gains do you receive by staying mired in the old – security, predictability, validation from others? Are you now tired enough, hurting enough to begin to take the soul's journey on?
8. Where are you still looking for permission to live your life? Do you think that someone else is going to give it to you? What are you waiting for, someone else to write the script of life for you?
9. Where do you need to grow up? When will this happen? Do you think someone else will do it for you?
10. What have you always felt called toward, but feared to do? Does this possibility summon you, symbolically if not literally? What new life wishes to come into being through you?

If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster - Stephen Covey

Life must be remembered backward but lived forward – Soren Kierkegaard

The meaning of life

Life is simple. We make it complex. And that complexity shows no sign of changing in the time ahead. Our brains store billions of bytes of information and we absorb thousands of media and marketing images every day. For most of the 20th century most of the planet had never made a phone call and now the average teen can send and receive several thousand text messages per month.

All this complexity can obscure the simplest truths. The greatest secret of existence, the meaning of life and the key to happiness can lie hidden under so many layers of Facebook updates, tweets and downloads that it is possible, sadly, that many of us can go through our entire life never encountering the reason we're here and what could bring real fulfilment.

So we fill this space with what I call 'cultural counterfeits'. They fill the void for fleeting moments. At this time in history we seem to lack the cultural imagination to come up with much more than the ancient triumvirate of money, sex and power. In a million different ways, from Hollywood to prime-time TV, from MTV to magazines we keep clinging on to the idea that if we are beautiful enough, sexy enough or have enough power we will, one day, suddenly arrive at the magical moment of being, officially, one hundred percent, happy!

If you stop for a moment you won't find it too hard to discover what a weak and flimsy belief system this is. Why do so many Hollywood stars, possessed with supposedly perfect looks, perfect bodies and perfect lives struggle with destructive impulses that frequently descend into addictions to sex or substance? Why do so many leaders abuse power and devolve into corruption and abuse? Why do millionaires and billionaires still struggle with depression.

Consistent studies around the world show that money is correlated to happiness only to a point. If you live in chronic poverty then adding money to your life has been shown to increase happiness but not exponentially. Once most needs are met, adding more money does not lead to more happiness. If this was true then the richest people in the world would be the happiest. They're not. They may not be unhappy either but the sheer scale of their wealth does not transfer into the economy of human joy within them.

So. What will do it? What will bring you consistent joy? What is the meaning of your life?

Maybe I can answer that question with a question. Why was Mother Teresa of Calcutta always smiling?

The meaning of life is to find a meaning outside of yourself.

The universe is governed by certain laws. Gravity, quantum physics, the laws of thermodynamics and on it goes. You don't have to understand the laws. You don't have to like them but your life will be a lot easier if you don't try and fight them. For example, gravity does not care whether you believe in it or not. Gravity will just get on with the business of being gravity and things will work better for you if you cooperate.

The meaning of life, the meaning of our existence is that we are created to love and serve others. The more you seek to love and to serve those around you the more, over time, the focus of your life shifts outward, you are elevated above your own self-absorption into the bigger world, the real world around you.

We are contingent beings. We did not make ourselves. We were created by a love so generous that being made in its image we are compelled to love as it loves. And this is the meaning of life. It's the reason why Mother Teresa was always smiling. It's the secret that could help you smile more often.